

Museum-School Experience Educates in a Nontraditional Setting

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Every once in a while we have an opportunity here at the Lake Superior Maritime Visitor Center to work with teachers and students in ways apart from the traditional school field trip model. One of those opportunities presented itself a year ago, and it was a delight.

Traditionally, school programs are presented in the Visitor Center with an organized presentation running to about 30 minutes, and sometimes to 60 minutes, with an additional half hour or more for students to explore the exhibits throughout the building and venture outside to see some of the artifacts in the park or take a stroll out onto the ship canal piers to see the light-houses or gaze at the Aerial Bridge. With some luck, one of the tour boats will pass beneath the bridge so that students can see it in operation. Or, if they are really fortunate, to see one of the numerous lakers or even a saltie slowly make its way through the canal. And sometimes, there might be a boat at anchor waiting its turn at a berth inside.

Field trips are fun and exciting learning experiences, but they are also s-h-o-r-t. There is little opportunity to really interact with teachers and students to blend an organized program with their individual needs and goals.



The Soo Locks students are examining exhibits to learn and help plan their own displays. *CORPS OF ENGINEERS PHOTO BY THOM HOLDEN*

Duluth's Woodland Middle School, its principal, and four teachers and their classes of 6th grade students were given the opportunity through a grant to explore a different model, a museum school model. In a nutshell teachers worked with specialists at several local institutions to learn enough about the unique educational opportunities of each and to work directly with the educator in teaching their students outside the classroom at the different sites. The sites were not ?museums? in the traditional sense, either. They included an art museum, outdoor nature center, zoo, and our maritime visitor center.

Besides all the logistical things involving time and transportation and lunches, etc. museum schools involve building trust and confidence that the classroom time spent out of school will be as beneficial or even more beneficial than time at school in the usual setting. Several meetings with the teachers and educators as a group and then one on one with a teacher at each site went even better than expected. There were no real hitches.

Every student in each class got to visit each of the sites with the teacher and educator who had developed a program for them specific to the resources available there. Have

you ever thought about science in an art museum or math at the zoo or reading and literature at a nature center or social studies at a marine museum? These were all opportunities for students and teachers to think outside the box and share experiences they might not otherwise have had. Many activities were hands-on with real objects and animals. The common theme was water.

At the end of their experiences each of the students had to prepare their own "museum exhibit" which could be artwork or an exhibit or a PowerPoint presentation or whatever they chose.

The students' final productions covered the whole range of possibilities in both format and subject matter. Students were overwhelmingly enthusiastic as parents and visitors viewed their final projects in a huge open house.

When all was said and done, was there educational advancement? Absolutely, as demonstrated by before and after testing of students.

What was harder to measure, but patently obvious, was that really good students continued to do really well, average students generally used the opportunity to shine, and at risk students who struggled in the regular classrooms seemed to spring to life and advanced the furthest. Learning in different ways and being hands-on in real world settings with an opportunity to express their knowledge through non-traditional "testing" allowed them to stand tall.

It was a great experience for everyone. In many ways it was the blossoming of a constructivist educational experience where each individual internalized their own meaning from a variety of non-traditional settings to see familiar curriculum material expressed in different ways.

Special thanks to social studies teacher Carol Holm and the staff and faculty at Woodland Middle School of Duluth, Minnesota for inviting the Corps of Engineers' Lake Superior Maritime Visitor Center to be part of their museum school experience.



This PowerPoint Fitzgerald exhibit provided an interactive educational opportunity.

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